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Interest representation in times of crises and turbulence. Resilient Civil Society Project report on the survey results in Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland 2026

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ReCiv

INTEREST REPRESENTATION IN TIMES OF CRISES AND TURBULENCE

Resilient Civil Society project report on the survey results in Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland
2026

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Introduction

Context

The analysis of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region is crucial for interest group research for several reasons. First, **multiple CEE countries are experiencing democratic erosion – be it democratic backsliding, as witnessed in Poland, or democratic stagnation, as experienced in Romania – and challenges to democracy in this region are more pronounced than in other parts of Europe**. Protests against policymakers' decisions threatening democracy have recently erupted in Lithuania (in the context of the potential politicisation of the national broadcaster), Bulgaria (in light of corruption and a new budget plan seen as socially unfair), Latvia (in protest at the country's possible withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention), all demonstrating the relevance of engagement by both civil society and organised interest groups. At the same time, CEE countries are experiencing a variety of other challenges. While some – such as the rapid development of technology or climate change – are common to the whole of Europe and beyond, others are region-specific, such as threats to national security stemming from hybrid attacks and disinformation in the context of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. As a result, interest groups are challenged not only by threats affecting the groups they represent, but also by the broader environment in which they operate, which may have an impact on their activities or even operation.

The **Resilient Civil Society Project** (ReCiv) therefore aims to examine how interest groups, including civil society organisations (CSOs) respond to crises* and how resilient they are in an increasingly turbulent environment**. In this report, we use the terms "CSOs" and "interest groups" interchangeably, referring to their advocacy activities. These concepts encompass public interest and cause groups, trade unions, professional and business associations, as well as private companies engaged in political advocacy.

As one of the project's research activities, ReCiv launched a cross-national survey of interest groups in eight European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden), as well as at the European Union level. **In 2025–2026, the project expanded its geographical scope to include three CEE countries: Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland.** This **report presents a descriptive analysis of the CEE countries survey findings**, focusing on the extent to which their interest groups are affected by external challenges, the strategies they adopt in response to crises, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these strategies. It concludes with a summary of the findings and recommendations emerging from the analysis.

** Periods characterised by high levels of uncertainty, societal pressure, and limited time to act.*
*** Periods characterised by high volatility, in which even routine interactions can produce unexpected outcomes.*

Who was invited to participate?

Following Junk et al. (2024), the same sampling approach was employed across all project surveys and adapted where necessary to reflect the national context. First, a sampling frame of interest organisations operating in each country was constructed using publicly available sources, including official registers and datasets compiled in previous research projects. Second, stratified random sampling was employed, whereby organisations were randomly selected within each organisational category. The target sample consisted of **approximately 150 organisations in each of five organisational categories, namely public interest and cause groups, trade unions, professional and business associations, as well as private companies**.

The **data sources and adjustments differed slightly across countries, reflecting the data available in each**. In Lithuania, we used a dataset developed for the Comparative Interest Group (CIG) Survey, updated to remove organisations that had ceased activity and supplemented, where categories were under-represented, with randomly selected organisations from the Rekvizitai.lt database. In Poland, we used the CIG dataset, which we complemented with the official list of public benefit organisations, and a systematic search of interest groups registered in the National Court Register. We also removed organisations that had officially ceased their activities or had declared long-term inactivity. After witnessing low activity levels from respondents in specific organisation groups, we have additionally used snowball sampling. In Estonia, we used the Estonian e-Business Register as our initial data source reclassifying organisations according to the categories used in our study and selecting organisations within each category to create a sample with a comparable structure across the three countries (see Table 1 for the resulting sampling frame by country and interest group category).

Table 1: Sampling frame composition by organisational category and country (N)

Interest group category	Lithuania	Poland	Estonia	Total
Business association	153	129	122	**404**
Private company	150	151	100	**401**
Professional association	154	151	147	**452**
Trade union	78	111	135	**324**
Public interest organisation	154	158	144	**456**
Total	**689**	**700**	**648**	**2037**

We collected the data in three consecutive country waves between late 2025 and 2026: Lithuania from September to December 2025, Poland from January to July 2026, and in Estonia from May to August 2026. **We developed the questionnaire in English and translated it into the national languages** using machine translation tools. Native speakers from each country reviewed the translated versions. We then asked a representative of the interest group community to pilot the survey and review it for clarity in each language.

Overall, **we collected 323 completed questionnaires across the three countries**. We retained 112 questionnaires in Lithuania, corresponding to a response rate of 16.3%, and 73 in Estonia, corresponding to a response rate of 11.3%. In Poland, we retained 138 questionnaires in total, combining two recruitment paths: a stratified random sample, for which the response rate was 6.1%, and a supplementary snowball-sampling path, which yielded 95 completed questionnaires. Overall, this resulted in **a total of ~11.2% response rate**. It is important to note that respondents were able to skip individual survey questions; the number of responses therefore varies from question to question.

Although the findings cannot be considered representative of interest groups active in the CEE region or each of the countries individually, they nevertheless provide **valuable and first of their kind insights into the experiences of the CEE's interest groups in a context of crises and increasing turbulence**. We are immensely **grateful to all our respondents, who dedicated their time to this survey**.

Where applicable, this **report also provides comparative insights based on the ReCiv report on its survey of interest organisations operating in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden, and at the European Union level***. However, due to minor differences in survey questionnaires that were made in order to tailor them to the national context, not all the aspects are directly comparable.

Who took the survey?

Among the respondents who answered the question on the **type of their organisation**, the composition of the three national samples differs (Table 2). In Lithuania and Estonia, public interest and cause groups form the largest category (34% and 37% respectively), followed at some distance by professional associations (28% and 18%). In Poland, public interest and cause groups are an even larger majority (46%), but the rest of the sample looks different: professional associations account for a comparatively smaller share (15%, against 28% in Lithuania and 18% in Estonia), while companies or firms (21%) – a category that is marginal in the Lithuanian and Estonian samples – make up a substantially larger share. This suggests that, while public interest and cause groups anchor all three samples, the Lithuanian and Estonian data rely relatively more on professional associations, whereas the Polish one includes a wider mix of organisational types, including a larger share of private companies.

** All project outputs are available on its website: https://sites.google.com/view/michelecrepazcom/home/projects/reciv-project*

Table 2: Organisation types represented in the survey, by country

Organisation type	Lithuania	Poland	Estonia	Total
Public interest organisation	32 (34%)	63 (46%)	25 (37%)	**120 (40%)**
Professional association	26 (28%)	20 (15%)	12 (18%)	**58 (19%)**
Business association	15 (16%)	13 (9%)	17 (25%)	**45 (15%)**
Trade union	15 (16%)	12 (9%)	10 (15%)	**37 (12%)**
Private company	6 (6%)	29 (21%)	4 (6%)	**39 (13%)**
Total	**94**	**137**	**68**	**299 (100%)**

Note: the survey question: "Which of the following categories best describes your organisation?". Rows may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Turning to the **policy field most relevant to organisations' work** (Table 3), "Other" write-in responses form the single largest category in all three countries (28% in Lithuania, 24% in Poland, 31% in Estonia), reflecting that activities of many respondents are distributed across multiple policy fields and/or they perceive their core work as representation of multiple rather than as belonging to a specific field. Among the substantive fields, health and social work as well as education and information are among the most represented in all three countries. Furthermore, rights, advocacy and community development organisations are more represented in the case of Poland (14%) and Estonia (12%), but less so – in Lithuania (8%). On the other hand, transport and logistics as well as environment and animal rights are the least represented policy fields in the survey.

Generally, the responses in all three countries are dominated by **small organisations**. In Lithuania, the majority of respondents (76% of the 87 organisations that answered) reported fewer than 10 full-time staff; in Estonia, small organisations are even more prevalent (82% of 67 respondents). In Poland the respondents represent larger organisations: 57% of 135 respondents report fewer than 10 staff, with a much larger share than in Lithuania or Estonia reporting more than 500 staff – 13%, against 3% in Lithuania and 4% in Estonia. While generally a considerable share of organisations has no staff responsible for political activities, this varies by country: 40% in Lithuania and 32% in Poland report no dedicated political/advocacy staff, compared with only 12% in Estonia. Overall, **dedicated resources for political or advocacy activities are limited in most organisations surveyed, but, despite typically smaller size of the organisations, noticeably less so in Estonia than in Lithuania or Poland**.

Table 3: Fields most relevant to the work of surveyed organisations, by country

Policy field	Lithuania (N=92)	Poland (N=137)	Estonia (N=68)
Other (write-in)	26 (28%)	33 (24%)	21 (31%)
Health and social work	18 (20%)	14 (10%)	8 (12%)
Education and information	17 (18%)	29 (21%)	9 (13%)
Culture, arts, sport and recreation	8 (9%)	10 (7%)	5 (7%)
Rights, advocacy and community development	7 (8%)	19 (14%)	8 (12%)
Manufacturing and industry	6 (7%)	6 (4%)	2 (3%)
Primary sector and construction	4 (4%)	7 (5%)	2 (3%)
Energy and utilities	3 (3%)	4 (3%)	2 (3%)
Trade and finance	3 (3%)	6 (4%)	4 (6%)
Transport and logistics	0 (0%)	4 (3%)	3 (4%)
Environment and animal rights	0 (0%)	5 (4%)	4 (6%)

Note: categories provided in the survey were grouped into broader ones. The survey question: "Which of the following fields of activity is most relevant for the work of your organisation?".

Similarly, when asked to estimate how their resources are divided across four areas – membership services, internal management, advocacy and policy work, as well as other activities – the balance differs across the three countries (Table 4). Lithuanian and Estonian organisations devote the largest share of their resources to membership services (36% and 31% respectively), while Polish organisations instead devote the largest share to internal management (34%). Advocacy and policy work accounts for the smallest share of resources in Lithuania (21%) and Poland (19%), but is the largest resource category in Estonia (32%), suggesting that **Estonian interest groups in the sample are, on average, comparatively more advocacy-oriented than their Lithuanian and Polish counterparts**.

Table 4: Average share of organisational resources allocated across activities, by country

Resource area	Lithuania (N=95)	Poland (N=131)	Estonia (N=68)
Membership services	36%	25%	31%
Internal management	26%	34%	20%
Advocacy / policy work	21%	19%	32%
Other activities	18%	22%	17%

Note: the survey question: "How would you estimate the approximate share of your organisation's resources allocated to advocacy and policy-related efforts, internal management, membership services versus everything else?".

Across all three countries, **access to public and political debate is perceived as infrequent by most surveyed organisations**. Similarly, in all three countries contact with the national bureaucracy is the channel accessed most often (41% of Lithuanian, 48% of Polish and 51% of Estonian organisations accessing it at least monthly), while the municipal/subnational bureaucracy tends to be accessed less. On the one hand, this is an interesting finding, considering the principle of subsidiarity, which points to the need for problem solving on the level where the problem arose. On the other hand, this result could be affected by the composition of the sample, including mostly national level organisations. Media presence follows a broadly similar pattern in all three countries, with the majority of organisations appearing in the media less than once a month or never. Overall, Estonian organisations report somewhat more frequent access across most channels than their Lithuanian and Polish counterparts, particularly for invitations to advisory bodies and consultations, where "never" responses are markedly lower in Estonia (10–12%) than in Lithuania (19%) or Poland (21–23%). This finding is not surprising, considering the comparatively higher level of resources that Estonian interest groups dedicate to advocacy and policy work (see Table 5).

Table 5: Frequency of access to public and political debates, by channel and country

Channel	Country	N	Never	Less than once a month	Once a month	Once a week	Almost daily
Media (press/radio/TV)	Lithuania	100	17%	**61%**	10%	**12%**	0%
	Poland	132	27%	40%	18%	9%	6%
	Estonia	68	19%	51%	22%	6%	1%
Invitation to advisory bodies / expert groups	Lithuania	100	19%	51%	23%	6%	1%
	Poland	131	21%	**43%**	26%	6%	4%
	Estonia	69	12%	43%	**29%**	10%	6%
Invitation to consultations by public authorities	Lithuania	99	19%	54%	20%	6%	1%
	Poland	132	23%	40%	24%	8%	5%
	Estonia	67	10%	49%	28%	7%	4%
Direct contact with politicians (any level)	Lithuania	97	20%	54%	15%	7%	**4%**
	Poland	130	21%	36%	25%	8%	**10%**
	Estonia	67	9%	49%	27%	12%	3%
Direct contact with MPs / their offices	Lithuania	96	23%	53%	17%	4%	3%
	Poland	126	**26%**	40%	18%	10%	6%
	Estonia	65	**22%**	52%	17%	8%	2%
Direct contact with municipal bureaucracy	Lithuania	95	**29%**	51%	11%	6%	3%
	Poland	128	13%	41%	24%	**16%**	5%
	Estonia	66	11%	**61%**	20%	6%	3%
Direct contact with national bureaucracy	Lithuania	99	17%	41%	**26%**	11%	**4%**
	Poland	128	20%	32%	**29%**	13%	7%
	Estonia	70	7%	41%	24%	**17%**	**10%**

Note: rows may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. The survey question: "On average, how often does your organisation get access to public or political debates in the following ways per year (across all topics, issues, and campaigns)?". Highlight marks the highest values for each of the countries across categories.

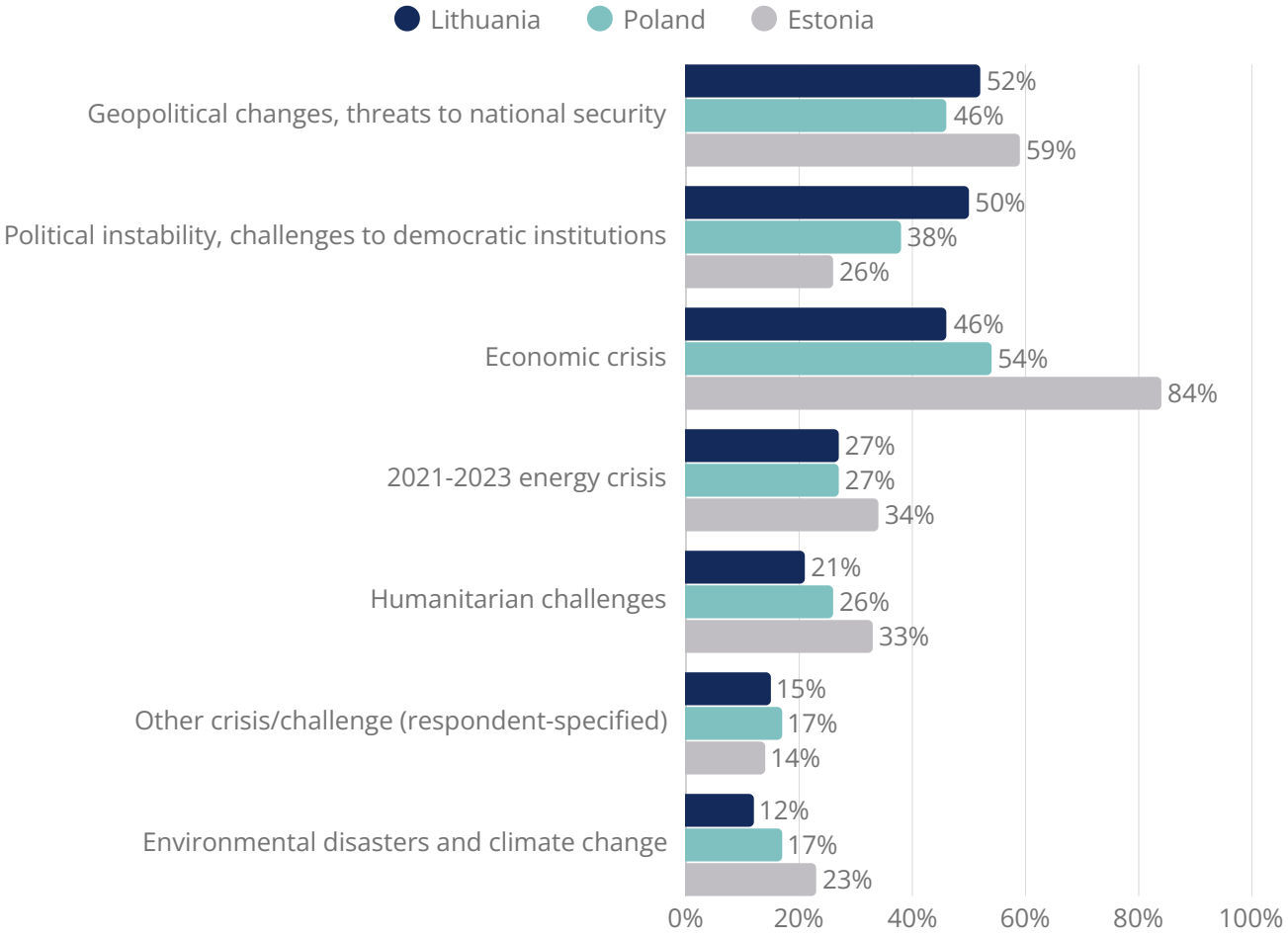
Overview of the survey results

To what extent are the organisations affected by crises and turbulence?

Organisations in all three countries were asked whether they had experienced tangible consequences from a set of recent global challenges: the 2021–2023 energy crisis, the economic crisis, geopolitical changes and threats to national security, humanitarian and labour-market pressures, political instability, as well as environmental disasters and climate change. Exposure to at least one of these crises was close to universal in all three countries: 96% of Lithuanian and Estonian as well as 91% of Polish organisations reported being affected by at least one. **Multiple, overlapping crises were also the norm rather than the exception everywhere, though to varying degrees**: 60% of Lithuanian, 67% of Polish and as many as 75% of Estonian organisations were affected by two or more crises, with **Estonian organisations experiencing the polycrisis environment the most** (mean 2.7 crises per organisation, against 2.2 in Lithuania and 2.3 in Poland).

Which crises affected the most organisations, however, differs by country (Figure 1). **In Lithuania, geopolitical changes and threats to national security** (52%) as well as political instability (50%) **affected the largest share of organisations**, closely followed by the economic crisis (46%). **In Poland, the economic crisis was the most widely felt** (54%), ahead of geopolitical changes (46%) and, notably, political instability affected a comparatively smaller share (38%) than in Lithuania. **In Estonia, the economic crisis stands out sharply as by far the most widely felt challenge**, affecting 84% of organisations – a much higher share than in either Lithuania or Poland – followed by geopolitical changes (59%); political instability, by contrast, affected the smallest share of Estonian organisations of any of the three countries (26%). **Environmental disasters and climate change affected the smallest share of organisations in all three countries**, though this share was somewhat higher in Estonia (23%) than in Lithuania (12%) or Poland (17%).

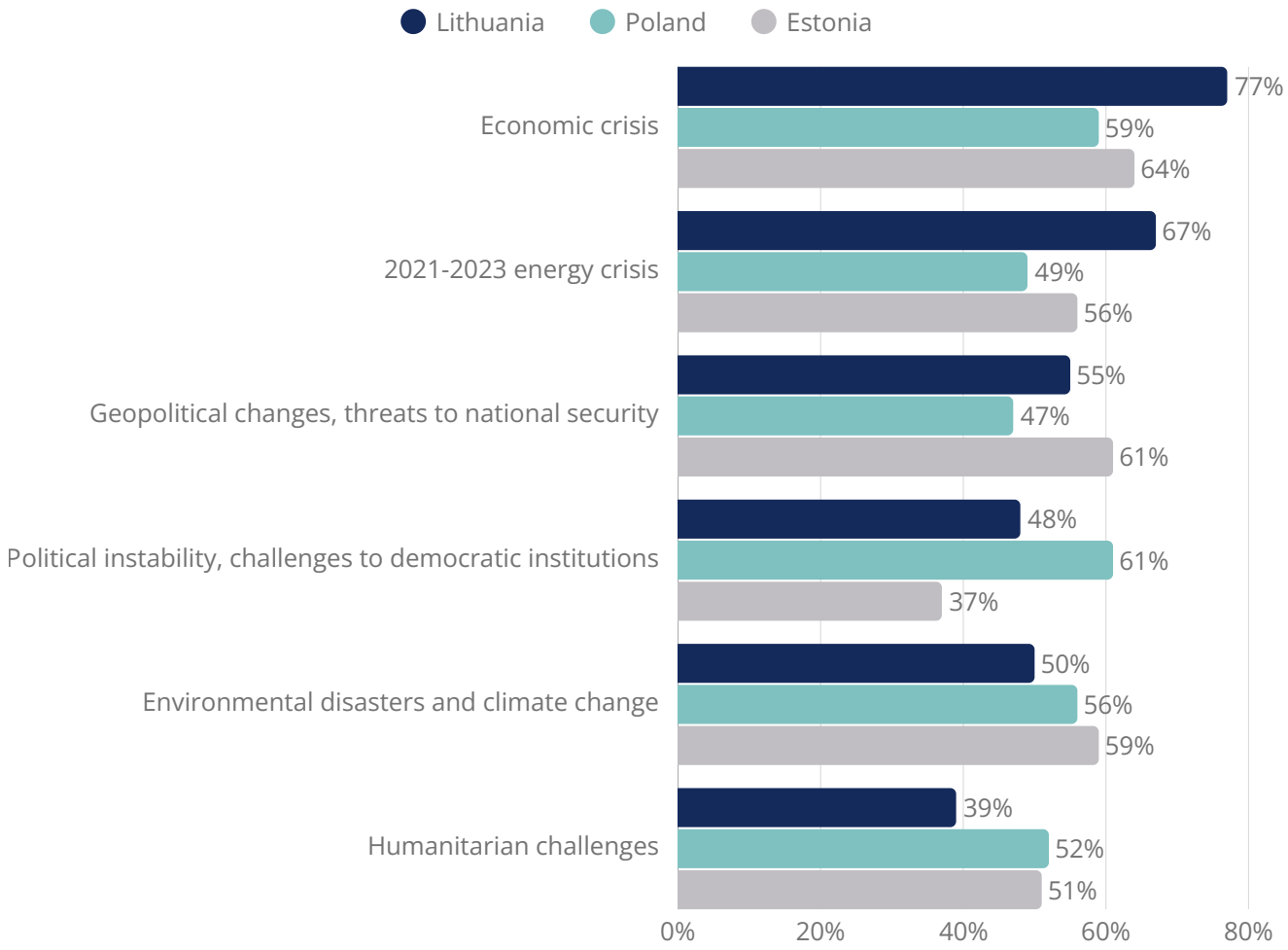
Figure 1: Share of organisations impacted by each type of crisis, by country



Note: organisations could select more than one crisis, therefore percentages sum to more than 100% within each country. The "Other" row captures respondents who specified a crisis or challenge, which is not among the six listed above. The survey question: "Please take a moment to consider which of the global changes listed below (if any) have had tangible consequences for your organisation over the past two years."

Among organisations that were affected by each crisis, the self-reported affectedness also varies by country (Figure 2). **In Lithuania, the economic crisis stands out as the most severe** (77% strongly or very strongly affected among those impacted by it), followed by the energy crisis (67%); the two most widespread crises – geopolitical changes and political instability – were perceived as comparatively less severe (55% and 48% respectively). **In Poland, political instability was rated the most severe of all crises among those it affected** (61% strongly or very strongly affected), ahead of the economic crisis (59%) and environmental disasters (56%); geopolitical changes and the energy crisis were rated somewhat less severe (47% and 49%). **In Estonia, the economic crisis was again rated highly severe** (64%), similar to geopolitical changes (61%) and environmental disasters (59%), while political instability – which affected the fewest Estonian organisations – was also rated the least severe of any crisis in Estonia (37%).

Figure 2: Interest groups' affectedness by type of crisis or turbulence, by country



Note: rated only by organisations that reported being affected by the given crisis. The survey question: "To what extent did the consequences of each selected global change affect your organisation?".

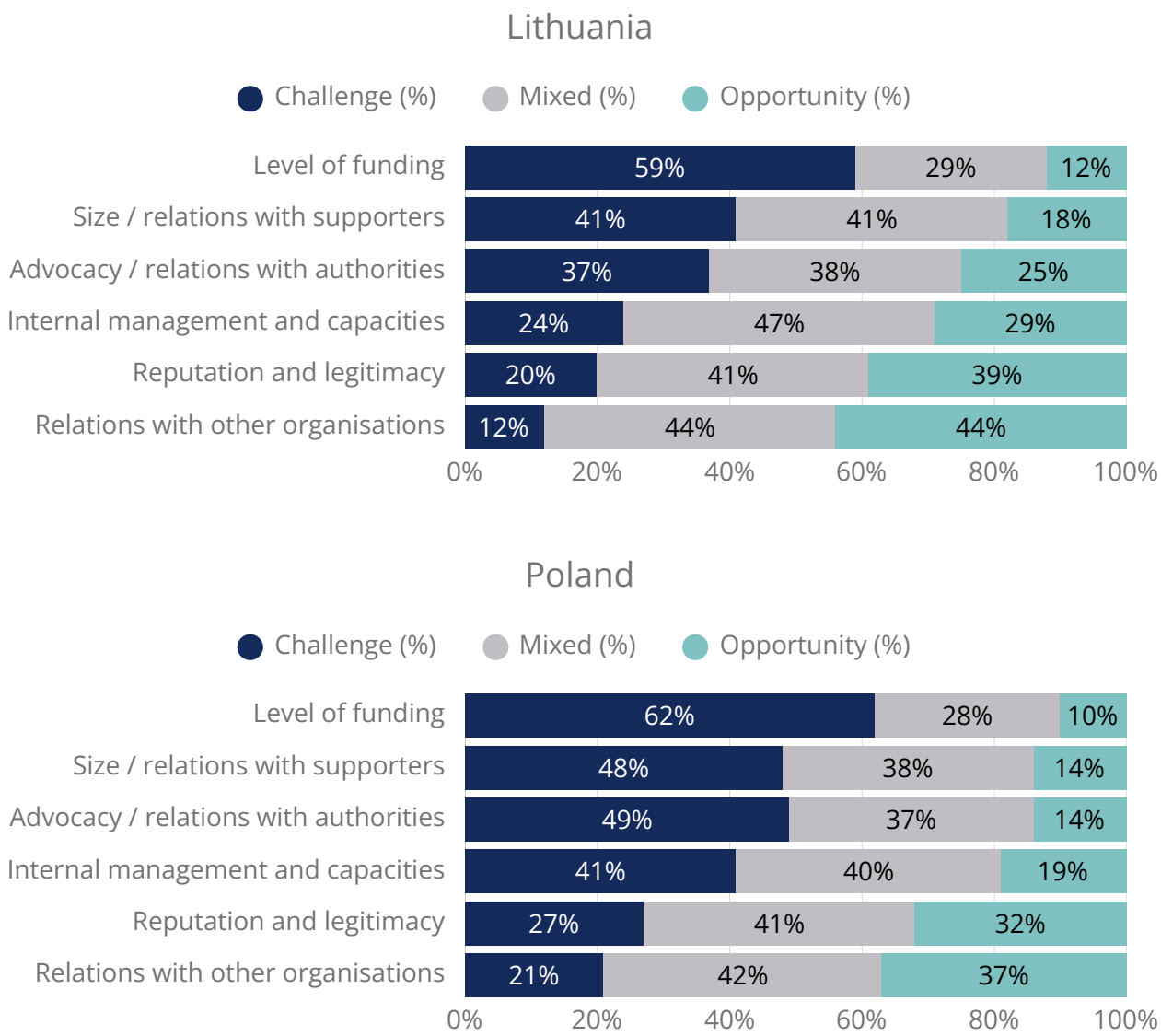
Comparison with organisations in Western and Nordic Europe and at EU level

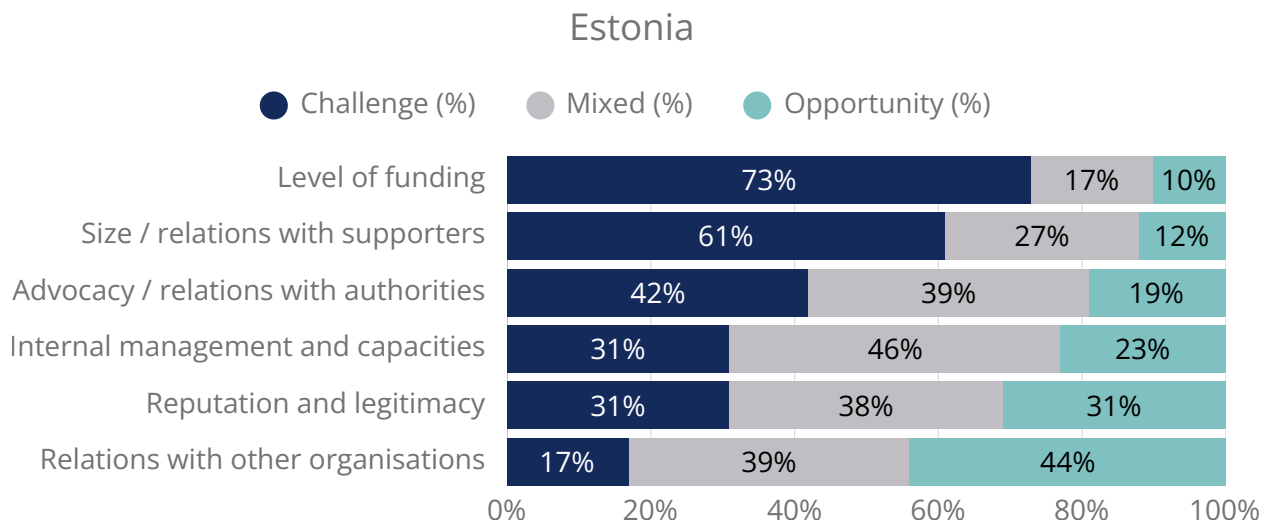
Exposure to crises and turbulence is markedly higher among CEE interest groups than among their Western and Northern European counterparts. Across the eight countries and EU level covered by the wider ReCiv survey, 70% of organisations reported being affected by at least one major disruption, and 55% by more than one. In Lithuania and Estonia, 96% of organisations reported being affected by at least one crisis, and in Poland – 91%, with 60–75% affected by two or more. In other words, being untouched by crisis, which describes 30% of the wider European sample, is close to a non-existent condition in CEE.

Crisis: a challenge or an opportunity?

For each crisis they had experienced, organisations were asked to assess six aspects of their operations – advocacy and relations with public authorities, level of funding, size and relations with supporters, reputation and legitimacy, internal management and capacities, and relations with other organisations – indicating whether the crisis had been a challenge, an opportunity, or a mix of both (Figure 3). A remarkably consistent pattern holds across all three countries: **funding is, everywhere, the dimension most often rated a challenge** (perceived as such by 59% of Lithuanian, 62% of Polish and 73% of Estonian organisations), while **relations with other organisations sit at the opposite pole, emerging as the strongest opportunity** (44% in Lithuania, 37% in Poland, 44% in Estonia).

Figure 3: Average perception of crises as challenges and opportunities, by country





Note: "Challenge" = major challenge + challenge; "Opportunity" = opportunity + major opportunity. Pooled across all types of crises within each country, including the respondent-specified "Other" crisis category. The survey question: "Crises can represent both challenges and opportunities for organisations. Please assess the extent to which [name of the crisis or turbulence] was perceived within your organisation as a challenge and/or an opportunity with regard to the activities and organisational characteristics listed below".

Crisis-specific patterns also differ somewhat across the three countries (see Table 6 below). **In Lithuania, the energy crisis was perceived as the most uniformly challenging** (42% challenge on average), while the **geopolitical and humanitarian crises were experienced as the most opportunity-rich** (34% each). **In Poland, political instability stands out as the most challenging crisis** (52% challenge on average), **with the energy crisis and humanitarian challenges perceived as providing the most opportunities** (26%). **In Estonia, political instability is again rated the most challenging** on average (49%), while **environmental disruptions are, uniquely among the three countries, rated as the most opportunity-rich of all crises** (41% opportunity on average).

Table 6: Crisis-specific challenge/opportunity patterns, by country

Crisis type	Country	N	Challenge %	Mixed %	Opportunity %
Energy	Lithuania	29	42	39	19
	Poland	35	31	43	26
	Estonia	25	39	40	22
Economic	Lithuania	48	34	39	27
	Poland	74	39	43	17
	Estonia	59	45	35	20
Geopolitical	Lithuania	53	31	35	34
	Poland	63	37	39	24
	Estonia	43	40	39	22
Humanitarian	Lithuania	22	17	49	34
	Poland	34	34	39	26
	Estonia	23	37	38	25
Political instability	Lithuania	52	33	40	27
	Poland	52	52	32	17
	Estonia	17	49	26	25
Environmental	Lithuania	10	20	51	29
	Poland	20	46	30	24
	Estonia	17	29	30	41

Note: for each crisis type and country, figures are the average of six dimension-level percentages (see Figure 3), among respondents who reported experiencing that crisis, rounded to the nearest whole percent. Rows may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. Several cells rest on small samples (N ≤ 20), notably Environmental crisis and Political instability in Estonia. These percentages should be treated as indicative.

Stability of organisational resources and activities

Despite the perceived negative effect of crises on organisations' funding, their development over the last two years **tells a story of relative stability in Lithuania and Poland**. However, **Estonia demonstrates a perceived decline in this regard** (Table 7). In Lithuania, every indicator shows a slight net increase rather than decrease: staff numbers are perceived as essentially unchanged, while the lobbying/policy staff numbers grew modestly (+6 percentage points) and the level of services provided even more so (+11). Poland shows a broadly similar pattern of net growth (except the number of employees responsible for lobbying (-4)), with the support base growing considerably (+16) and the level of sales or services provided showing the largest gain of any indicator in any country (+41). In the case of Estonia, all indicators except the level of sales or services (+6) show a net decrease: staff numbers (-10), the number of employees responsible for lobbying (-12), and especially the support base (-14), which offers a markedly different trajectory from Lithuania and Poland.

Table 7: Change in organisational resources and activities over the past two years, by country

Resource / activity	Country	N	Increased	Stayed roughly the same	Decreased	Balance
Number of staff	Lithuania	83	19%	63%	18%	1
	Poland	132	23%	55%	22%	1
	Estonia	63	14%	62%	24%	−10
Number of employees responsible for engagement in policymaking	Lithuania	47	15%	77%	9%	6
	Poland	89	11%	74%	15%	−4
	Estonia	50	4%	80%	16%	−12
Size of the support base (members / volunteers / supporters)	Lithuania	77	29%	52%	19%	10
	Poland	124	31%	54%	15%	16
	Estonia	57	18%	51%	32%	−14
Level of sales or services provided	Lithuania	18	33%	44%	22%	11
	Poland	49	57%	27%	16%	41
	Estonia	18	28%	50%	22%	6

Note: rows may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. Balance = share reporting an increase minus share reporting a decrease. The survey question: "Please also indicate whether and how the below items have increased, stayed constant or decreased within your organisation in the last two years".

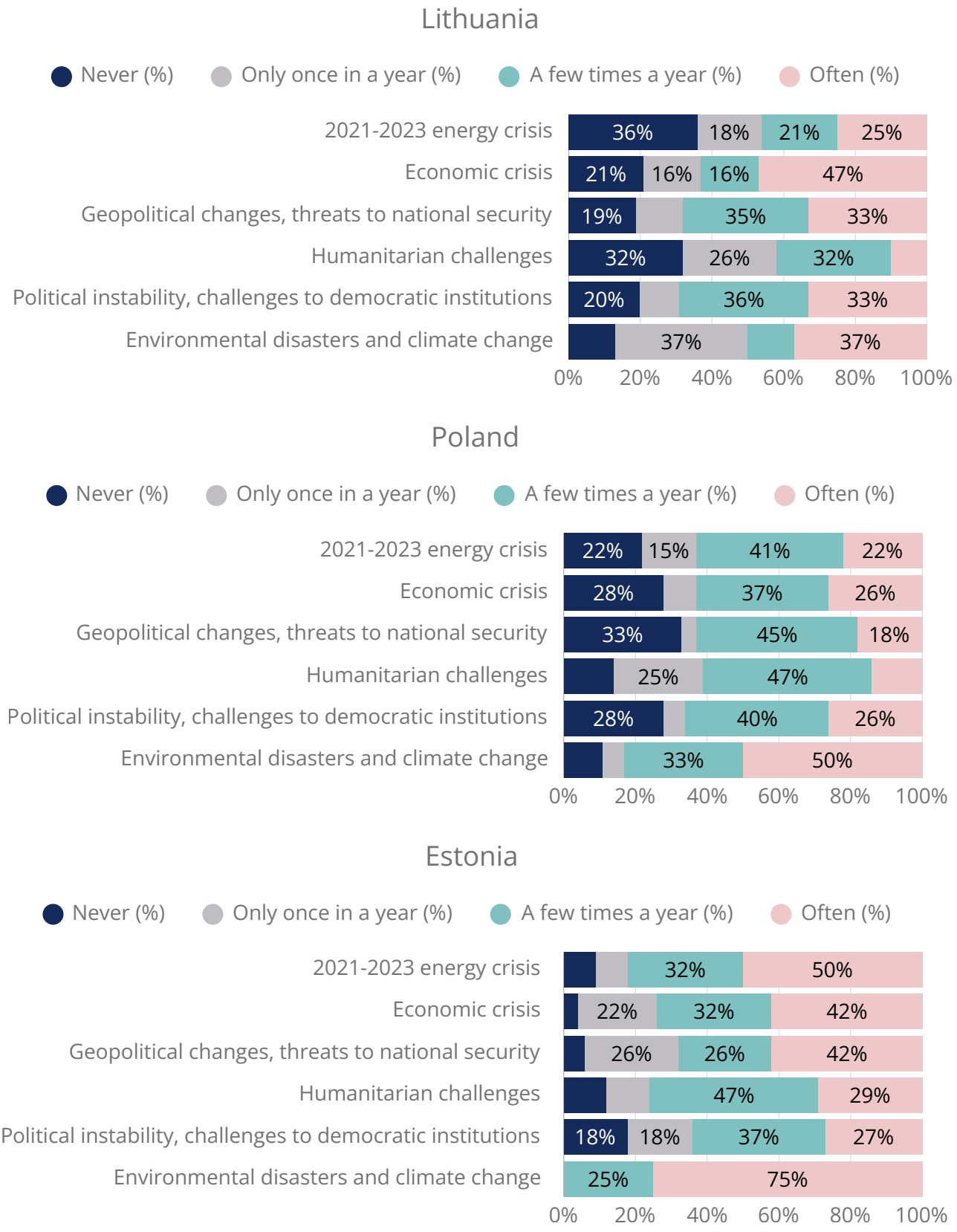
Comparison with organisations in Western and Nordic Europe and at EU level

Compared against the wider ReCiv survey, the CEE countries generally lag behind the broader European pattern of resource growth. The wider sample shows a clearly positive balance across all four categories – staff (+17), lobbying staff (+8), support base (+17), and sales or services (+29). Lithuania and Poland only partially keep pace: both post mild positive balances in staff and support base, but Poland's lobbying staff balance is negative (-4) against the wider sample's positive +8, while Lithuania's staff and lobbying gains (+1 and +6) fall well short of the European average. The clearest exception in either direction is Poland's sales/services balance (+41), which surpasses even the wider sample's already-strong +29. Estonia stands apart from both its CEE neighbours and the European pattern altogether, posting the only negative balance in staff, lobbying staff, and support base.

Frequency of crisis-related advocacy opportunities

For most crises and turbulences, roughly two-thirds of the organisations that experienced them engaged in advocacy work related to these external challenges or their consequences. Nevertheless, the intensity of that engagement varies by both crisis and country (Figure 4). In Lithuania, advocacy on the economic crisis was the most concentrated (47% advocated "often"), while the energy crisis recorded the highest "never" share (36%). In Poland, environmental disruptions saw the highest share of frequent advocacy (50% "often"), while geopolitical changes recorded the highest "never" share of any crisis (33%, which is considerably higher than the 19% seen in Lithuania for the same turbulence). In Estonia, advocacy engagement was consistently the most intensive of the three countries across nearly every crisis: environmental disruptions saw fully 75% of organisations advocating "often", and even the crisis with the lowest engagement (political instability) still saw only 18% reporting "never", which is below the equivalent Lithuanian (20%) and Polish (28%) shares.

Figure 4: Frequency of crisis-related advocacy, among organisations that experienced each crisis, by country



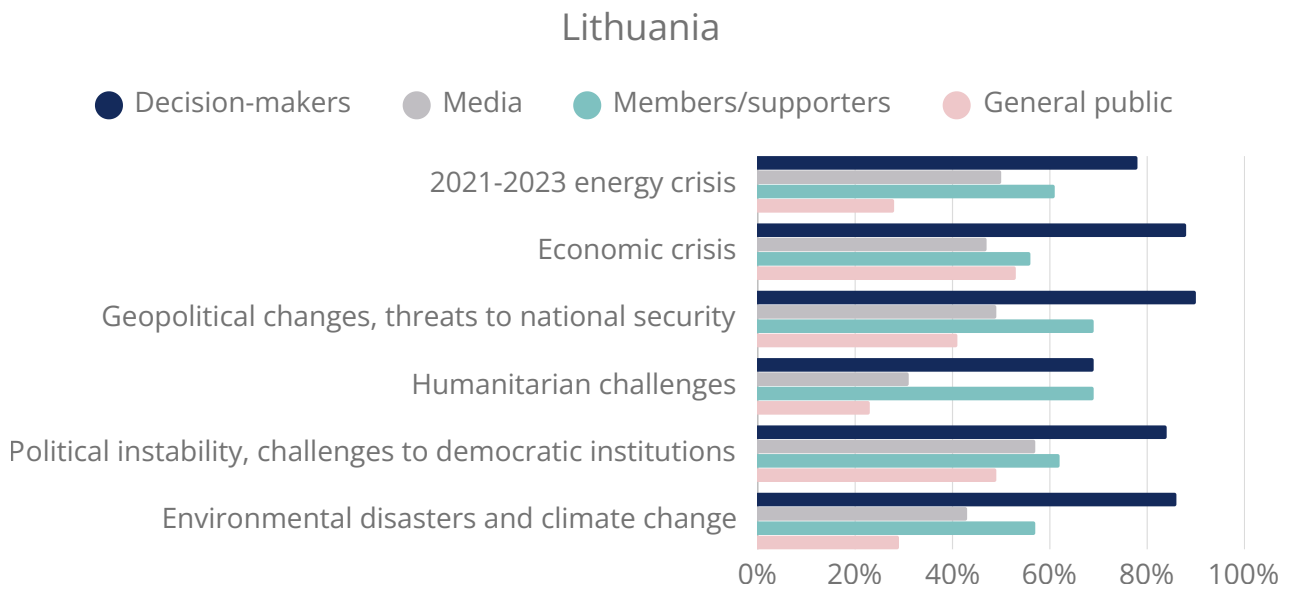
Note: rows may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. The survey question: "Please assess how often, over the past two years, your organisation's advocacy activities and involvement in policymaking have been related to the selected crisis and its consequences".

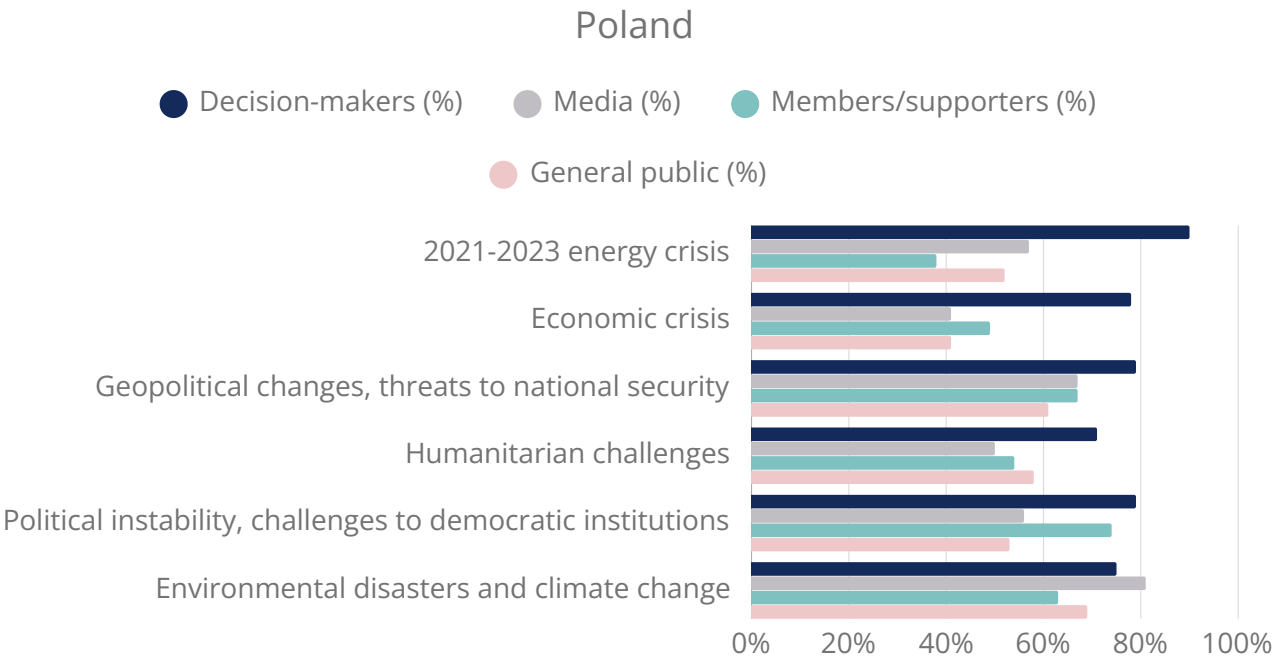
Two-way street? Advocacy activities and perceived engagement into decision-making in times of crises

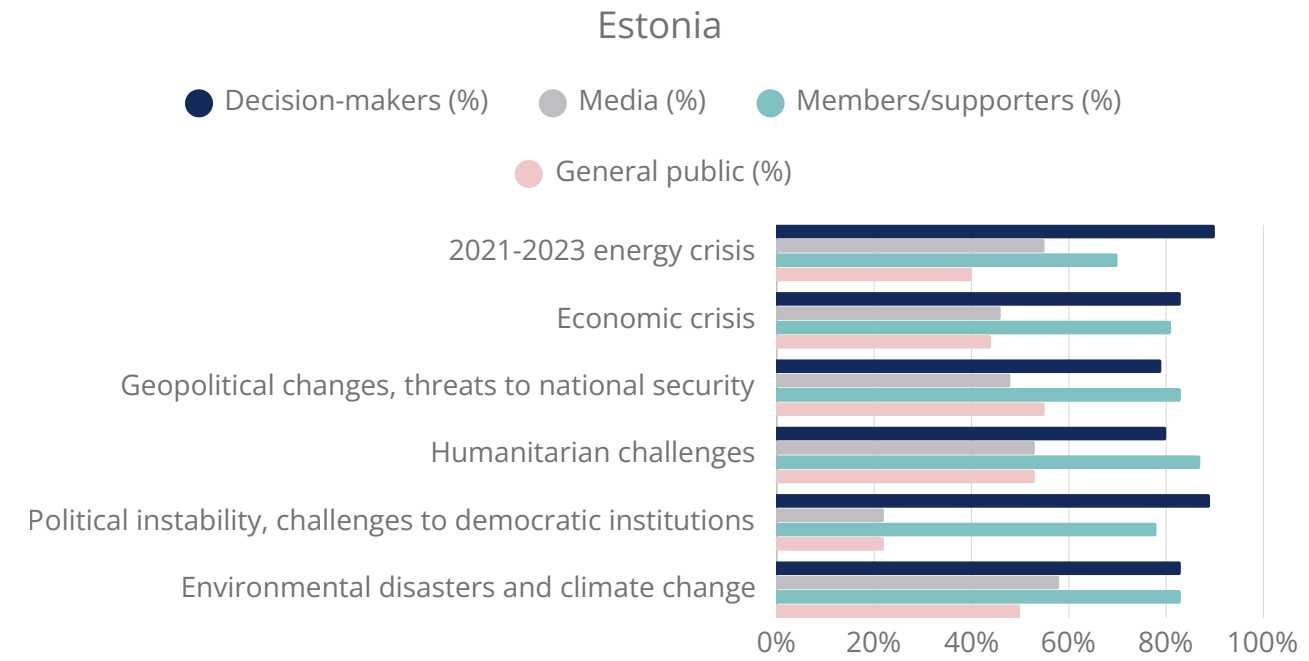
Across all three countries, advocacy in times of crises and turbulence is overwhelmingly aimed at decision-makers, who are the top target of advocacy activities for nearly every crisis (69–90% of advocating organisations in Lithuania, 71–90% in Poland, 79–90% in Estonia). **Members and supporters** are consistently the second most common target across all three countries, indicating that advocacy is also substantially inward-facing. Beyond this, national profiles diverge somewhat in how public-facing advocacy is used: in Lithuania, targeting of the general public varies widely by crisis (23–53%); in Poland, public and media targeting are both consistently higher than in Lithuania or Estonia, peaking for environmental disruptions (81% media, 69% public) and geopolitical changes (67% media, 61% public); in Estonia, targeting of members and supporters is markedly higher than in either other country for nearly every crisis (70–87%, against 56–69% in Lithuania and 38–74% in Poland) (see Figure 5).

There is a **moderate positive correlation between how strongly organisations report being affected by a crisis and how often they advocate on it** (e.g., 77% of the Lithuanian organisations were affected by the economic crisis and 47% of them often advocated on this topic). However, some significant exceptions remain. In particular, the environmental disasters and climate change is not perceived as having the highest affectedness in any country, yet it has by far the highest advocacy intensity everywhere, especially in Estonia (only 59% affected, but 75% often advocated – the highest advocacy figure across the CEE countries).

Figure 5: Target audiences of crisis-related advocacy, among organisations that advocated during a particular crisis, by country (%)







Note: "select all that apply" question, therefore responses sum to more than 100%. The survey question: "Please select all groups of actors that were targeted by your organisation's advocacy activities and involvement in policymaking".

Perceptions of how far decision-makers reciprocated this advocacy – by consulting or cooperating with organisations – differ across the three countries (Table 8). Across most crises, the mean sits close to or just below the neutral midpoint of the 1–5 agreement scale, and for **most crises roughly 40–55% of organisations disagreed that authorities consulted or cooperated with them**. Poland stands out for the lowest perceived engagement on political instability: only 15% agreed that they were consulted and 12% agreed that authorities cooperated with them (means of 2.5 and 2.3) – a notably weaker perception than in Lithuania (38%/35%, means 2.8) on the same crisis. Estonia, by contrast, shows relatiely stronger perceived engagement on political instability and humanitarian challenges

(56%/67% agreement on political instability, 54%/64% on humanitarian challenges) than either Lithuania or Poland, though these Estonian figures rest on small bases (N=9–14) and should be read with caution. **Geopolitical changes elicit comparatively higher perceived consultation and cooperation in Lithuania (56% and 44% agree respectively) than in Poland (39% and 31%) or Estonia (33% and 38%).**

Table 8: Perceived consultation and cooperation by public authorities, by crisis and country

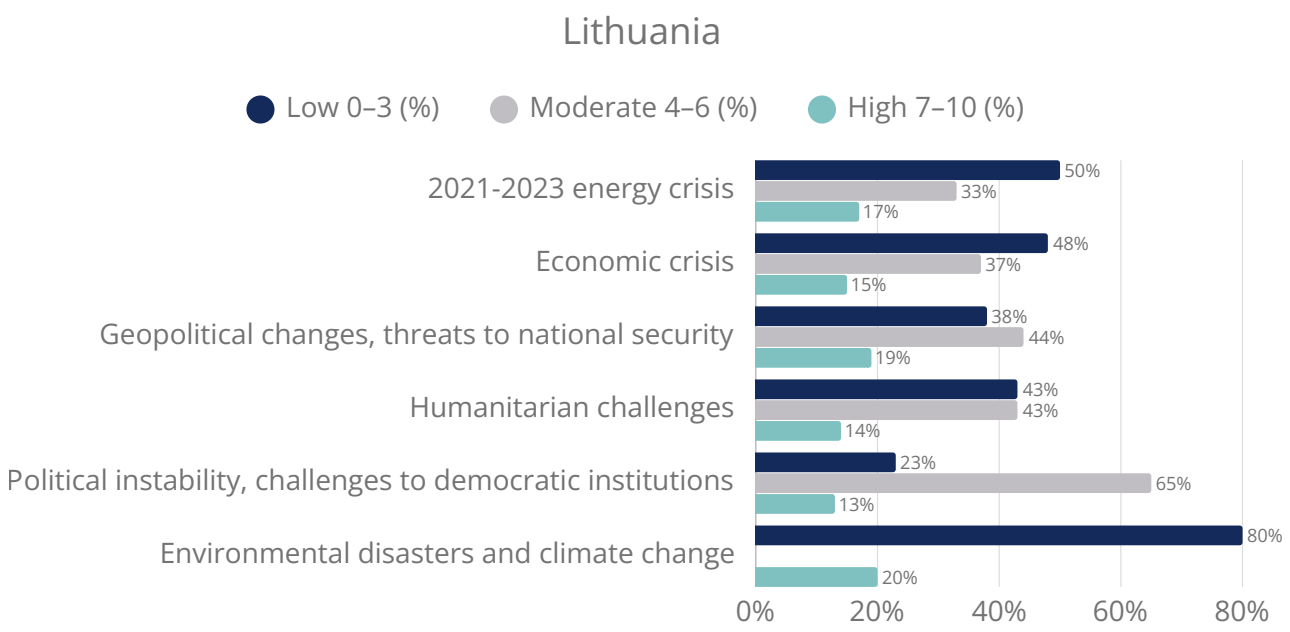
Crisis	Country	Consulted (N)	Agree (%)	Mean	Cooperated (N)	Agree (%)	Mean
2021–2023 energy crisis	Lithuania	15	40%	2.9	14	36%	2.7
	Poland	21	43%	3.1	21	48%	3.3
	Estonia	18	56%	3.2	17	29%	2.9
Economic crisis	Lithuania	30	40%	2.8	31	39%	2.8
	Poland	38	24%	2.7	39	31%	2.8
	Estonia	43	47%	3.1	42	36%	2.9
Geopolitical changes, threats to national security	Lithuania	39	56%	3.3	39	44%	3.1
	Poland	31	39%	3	32	31%	2.9
	Estonia	24	33%	2.8	24	38%	2.9
Humanitarian challenges	Lithuania	12	42%	2.8	13	38%	2.8
	Poland	22	41%	3	22	36%	3
	Estonia	13	54%	3.6	14	64%	3.9
Political instability, challenges to democratic institutions	Lithuania	34	38%	2.8	34	35%	2.8
	Poland	34	15%	2.5	34	12%	2.3
	Estonia	9	56%	3.3	9	67%	3.8
Environmental disruptions and climate change	Lithuania	6	100%	4.3	6	83%	4.2
	Poland	16	25%	2.8	16	31%	3.1
	Estonia	11	73%	3.5	12	58%	3.2

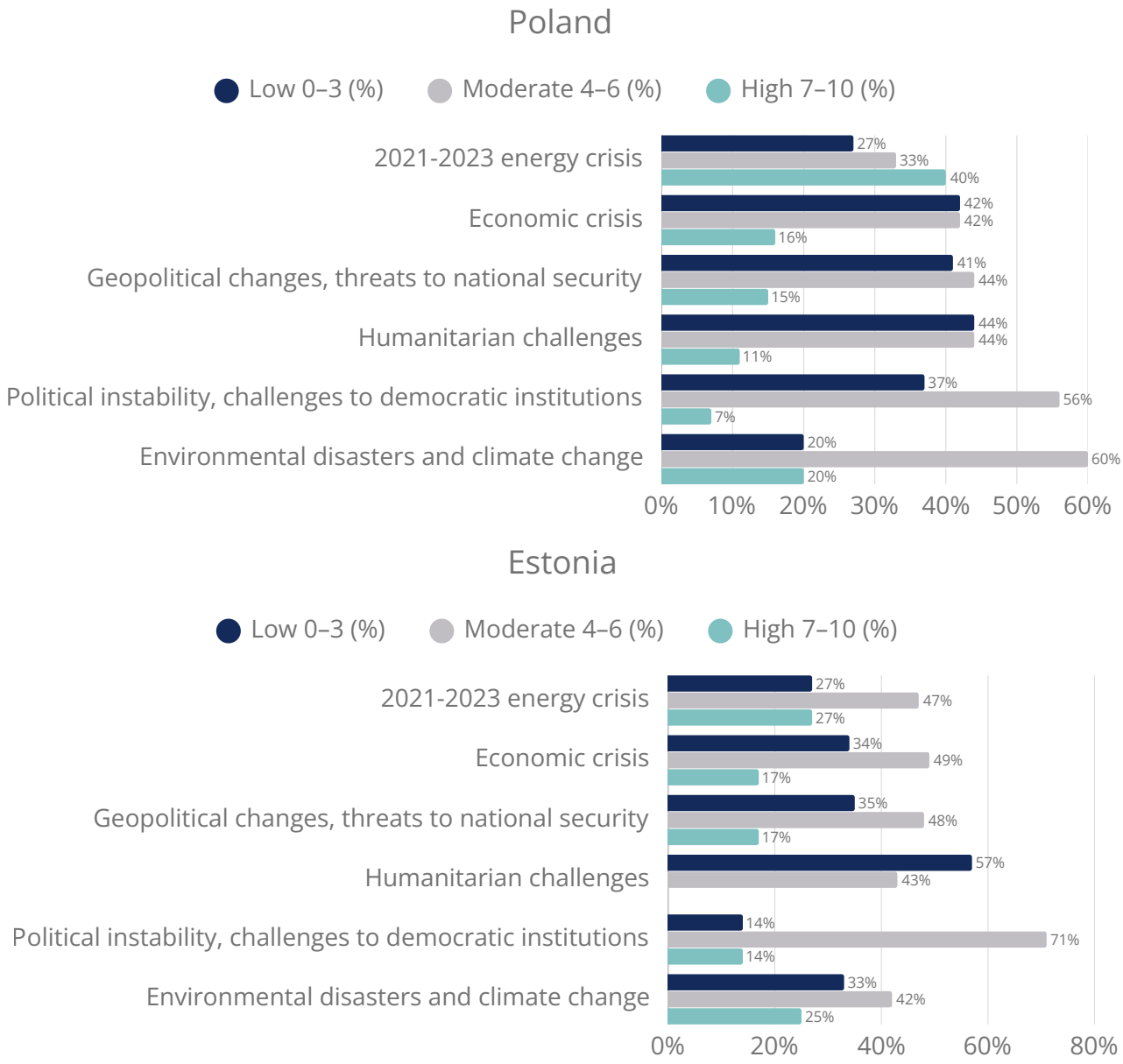
Note: This was a "select all that apply" question, therefore responses sum to more than 100%. The base for energy crisis, humanitarian challenges and environmental disruptions is very low and thus, the results should be interpreted only as illustrative. The survey question: "Please select all groups of actors that were targeted by your organisation's advocacy activities and involvement in policymaking".

Perceived success of crisis-related advocacy efforts

Relatively few organisations in any of the three countries felt they substantially achieved their advocacy objectives (Figure 6): pooled across all crises, the overall mean sits at a modest 4.3 in Lithuania, 4.4 in Poland and 4.5 in Estonia. In Lithuania, every crisis sits below the mid-point of a scale from 0 ("not achieved at all") to 10 ("fully achieved") (means 3.6–4.8), with political instability rated the most successful (mean 4.8); the energy, economic and environmental crises cluster at the bottom of the range (means 3.6–3.9). In Poland, perceived success is somewhat more crisis-dependent: the achievement of advocacy aims in the context of energy crisis stands out as the most successful (mean 5.5, the highest of any crisis in any of the three countries), while their achievement in the case of political instability is rated the least successful (mean 3.9). In Estonia, advocacy success in the context of political instability is again rated relatively successful (mean 5.1, albeit on a small base of N=7), while humanitarian challenges stand out as the least successful of any crisis across all three countries (mean 3.1). These findings are interesting as, despite higher resources dedicated to advocacy in Estonia, the perceived success of interest representation does not considerably differ from other countries.

Figure 6: Perceived success of advocacy objectives (0–10 scale), by crisis and country





Note: 0 = "not achieved at all", 10 = "fully achieved". The survey question: "To what extent were you able to achieve your objectives related to advocacy and policymaking activities in the context of the selected crisis?".

Comparison with organisations in Western and Nordic Europe and at EU level

Perceived success of advocacy specifically on political instability is rated more favourably in Lithuania and Estonia than at EU level. The wider ReCiv survey recorded a mean of just 3.25 (0–10 scale) for political instability-related advocacy, its second-lowest score of any crisis type. Lithuania (4.8) and Estonia (5.1) both rate their success on this same crisis noticeably higher, while Poland (3.9) sits closer to the EU figure. Overall, CEE organisations may face more frequent and more anxiety-inducing turbulence overall, but that does not automatically translate into less effective advocacy once they do engage.

Organisational responses to and preparedness for crises

In the era of crises and turbulence, organisations may receive support from multiple sources and stakeholders. **Across all three countries, the dominant finding is the same: organisations are supported overwhelmingly by their own base (members and supporters), far ahead of any other external actor** (Table 9). The mean support rating for members and supporters is 6.7 in Lithuania, 5.6 in Poland and 6.4 in Estonia – in each case well above every other actor, which cluster mostly between 2.8 and 4.6. Estonian organisations report somewhat stronger support from public bodies than their Lithuanian or Polish counterparts (mean 4.6, against 3.5 and 3.2 respectively), while Polish organisations report the weakest support from umbrella organisations of the three countries (mean 2.8, against 3.5 in Lithuania and 3.9 in Estonia).

Table 9: Support received from external actors in face of external challenges, by country

Source of support	Country	N	Mean (0–10)	% low (0–3)	% high (7–10)
Members and supporters	Lithuania	72	6.7	22%	51%
	Poland	108	5.6	28%	42%
	Estonia	58	6.4	29%	55%
Umbrella organisations	Lithuania	37	3.5	54%	19%
	Poland	67	2.8	66%	10%
	Estonia	43	3.9	51%	19%
Public bodies	Lithuania	47	3.5	53%	13%
	Poland	92	3.2	58%	10%
	Estonia	47	4.6	36%	28%
Networks and coalitions	Lithuania	22	3.4	55%	14%
	Poland	80	3.4	60%	12%
	Estonia	39	3.3	56%	13%
Trusts and foundations	Lithuania	25	2.8	72%	20%
	Poland	75	3.1	61%	13%
	Estonia	41	3.8	51%	15%

Regarding **resilience-building strategies** (Table 10), **all three countries show significant investments in advocacy**. It is rated the top strategy in Lithuania (mean 5.4) and, especially, in Estonia (mean 5.9, the highest single score recorded for any strategy in any country); in Poland, however, advocacy ranks only third (mean 4.0), behind networking (mean 4.9) and experimenting (mean 4.4). More broadly, Estonian organisations report substantially higher investment across nearly every resilience strategy than their Lithuanian and Polish counterparts – networking (mean 5.8), buffering (mean 5.3) and planning (mean 5.1) are all rated well above the Lithuanian and Polish equivalents (which mostly sit between 3.5 and 4.9) – suggesting a more actively resilience-oriented posture among the Estonian interest groups.

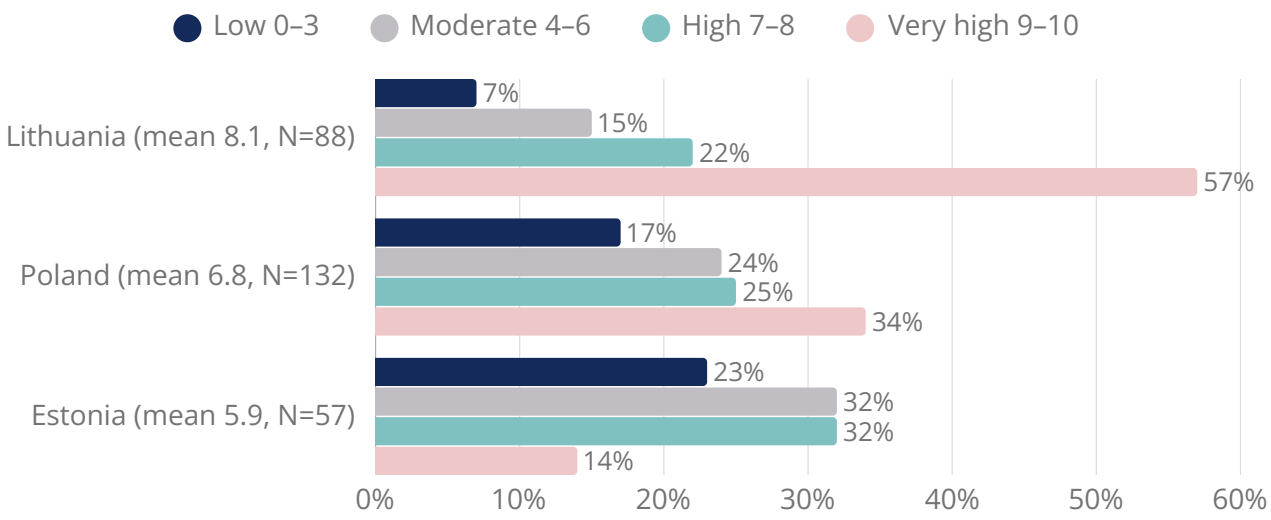
Table 10: Investment in strategies to respond to or pre-empt crises (0–10 scale), by country

Strategy	Country	N	Mean
Advocacy	Lithuania	77	5.4
	Poland	91	4
	Estonia	61	5.9
Networking	Lithuania	71	4.6
	Poland	110	4.9
	Estonia	63	5.8
Buffering	Lithuania	43	4.6
	Poland	85	3.5
	Estonia	53	5.3
Management	Lithuania	58	4.5
	Poland	105	4.1
	Estonia	57	4.2
Planning	Lithuania	60	3.9
	Poland	101	4
	Estonia	61	5.1
Experimenting	Lithuania	59	3.8
	Poland	92	4.4
	Estonia	60	4.7

Consistent with these investment patterns, **most organisations across all three countries perceive themselves to have coped reasonably well with the internal challenges crises have created**, both in terms of shielding (protecting existing structure, support base and activities) and adapting (implementing changes to address external challenges). **Lithuanian organisations rate themselves highest on shielding** (mean 6.7), **Estonian organisations are close behind on both measures** (means 6.2 and 6.1), while **Polish organisations report the largest gap between the two** – comparatively strong shielding (mean 6.1) but the weakest adapting score of the three countries (mean 5.2).

Despite this perceived success in coping, **organisations across all three countries report elevated levels of mortality anxiety** – worry about their organisation's future – but the degree differs sharply by country (Figure 7). **Lithuanian interest groups show by far the highest mortality anxiety of the three countries**: a mean of 8.1 out of 10, with 42% of organisations giving the maximum possible score of 10. Polish organisations report a markedly lower, though still elevated, mean of 6.8 (25% giving the maximum score), while **Estonian organisations report the lowest mortality anxiety of the three** – a mean of 5.9, close to the scale's midpoint.

Figure 7: How worried leaders are about their organisation's future (0–10 scale), by country (%)



Note: 0 = "not worried at all", 10 = "extremely worried". The survey question: "How worried are leaders in your organisation about its future?".

Taken together, this points to a striking divergence: while Estonian organisations report the most crowded polycrisis environment of the three countries (Figure 1) and the largest decrease of resources (Table 7), they simultaneously report the lowest mortality anxiety and comparatively stronger perceived support from public bodies (Table 9). Lithuanian organisations, by contrast, report comparatively more stable resources and successful shielding/adapting, yet the highest mortality anxiety. This suggests that mortality anxiety, in this sample, tracks something other than crisis exposure or resource trends alone – a question demanding further research.

Comparison with organisations in Western and Nordic Europe and at EU level

Worry about organisational survival is strongly elevated in the CEE region. In the wider ReCiv survey, mortality anxiety (0–10 scale) never rose above a mean of 4.9 for any organisational category. By contrast, Estonia – the CEE country with the lowest mortality anxiety of the three – still records a mean of 5.9, above every organisational category reported at EU level, while Poland (6.8) and especially Lithuania (8.1) far exceed it. The one partial exception in the wider survey is France, whose raw country-level mean of 6.5 comes close to Estonia's figure, though it remains below Poland and well below Lithuania; every other Western or Nordic country in the sample (from Denmark's 3.1 up to the Netherlands' 4.6) sits well beneath all three CEE countries. This suggests that the reasons driving mortality anxiety in the CEE region go beyond the operational pressures captured by the wider European survey, and are not simply explained by organisational type.

Summary of the key findings

01 **All three countries are living through a polycrisis, but with different national profiles.** The large majority of organisations in Lithuania and Estonia (96%) as well as Poland (91%) were affected by at least one recent crisis, and most were affected by two or more (60%, 75%, and 67% respectively. The highest polycrisis presence is noted in Estonia, with a mean of 2.7 recent crises or turbulences experienced per organisation. Geopolitical challenges and political instability affected the largest shares of organisations in Lithuania; the economic crisis dominates in Poland and, especially, in Estonia, where it affected 84% of organisations – far above the shares in Lithuania (46%) and Poland (54%). Among organisations that were affected by each crisis, the self-reported affectedness also varies by country. In Lithuania and Estonia, the economic crisis stands out as the most severe (77% and 64% of organisations respectively), while in Poland, political instability was rated the most severe (61%).

02 **A direct targeting of policymakers is the key advocacy strategy**, but perceived success and perceived engagement from authorities vary by country. In all three countries, advocacy overwhelmingly targets decision-makers first and members/supporters second, with public-facing channels (media, general public) used more selectively. Perceived success in achieving advocacy objectives is modest everywhere (means 4.3-4.5 out of 10), and perceived consultation/cooperation from public authorities is generally low.

03 **Crises are challenging but also provide opportunities** – a pattern that holds across all three countries. Funding is consistently the clearest and most universal challenge (59–73% across the three countries), while relations with other organisations are perceived as the strongest opportunity (37–45%).

04 **Organisations rely heavily on their own members**, but resilience-building strategies and resource trends diverge by country. Members and supporters are, in all three CEE countries, the dominant source of support (means 5.6–6.7 out of 10), far ahead of umbrella bodies, public bodies, networks or trusts and foundations. Estonian organisations report markedly higher investment in nearly every resilience-building strategy than their Lithuanian and Polish counterparts. At the same time, Estonia is also the only one of the three countries where core organisational resources (staff numbers, support base, dedicated lobbying staff) show a net decrease rather than growth or stability over the past two years. This could be interpreted two-fold: larger investments to resilience could be encouraged by the perceived decrease of organisational resources, or the decreased is caused by limited success of resilience strategies.

05 **Mortality anxiety is high across all three countries**, but Lithuania stands out sharply. Despite broadly stable or growing resources in Lithuania and Poland, and despite organisations across all three countries rating themselves as reasonably successful at shielding and adapting, worry about organisational survival is elevated everywhere and highest in Lithuania (mean 8.1 out of 10, with 42% of organisations giving the maximum possible score), followed by Poland (mean 6.8) and Estonia (mean 5.9).

Recommendations

Building on the survey results, recommendations are formulated. Considering that interest groups are acting in the complex decision-making ecosystem, recommendations are targeted not only to interest group organisations themselves, but also to decision-makers and public sector institutions.

Recommendations for interest groups

01 **Diversify funding strategies through interorganisational cooperation.** Funding is the most widely reported challenge in times of crises in all three countries (59–73% of organisations), while relations with other organisations are consistently the strongest opportunity (37–45%). Organisations – particularly in Estonia, where funding pressure is most acute – should treat existing collaborative ties as a concrete channel for shared fundraising and joint advocacy as well as build on opportunities for the further collaboration.

02 **Match resilience investments to your vulnerabilities and the risks that the organisations are the most likely to face.** Which crisis has the highest impact differs sharply by country (economic crisis in Lithuania and Estonia, political instability in Poland), and so does which strategy pays off – advocacy is the top-rated resilience strategy in Lithuania and Estonia, while Polish organisations lean more on networking. A strategic overview of existing crisis management measures and resilience-building tools is helpful in aligning them with the risks and vulnerabilities of a specific organisation or the whole sector. This could help understand which of the tools and (or) measures are most suitable to prepare for different risks, and thus, inform the allocation of scarce resources.

03 **Treat the targeting of policy makers as necessary but not sufficient.** Advocacy is aimed first at decision-makers in both Lithuania, Poland, and Estonia, yet perceived success remains modest (means 4.3-4.5 out of 10) and perceived consultation is often at or below the neutral midpoint. Complementing direct lobbying with the public- and media-facing channels that organisations currently under-use could build leverage for when direct access is constrained.

Recommendations for decision-makers

01 **Strengthen consultation channels around political instability specifically, and at the sub-national level generally**. Poland's political instability case is the starkest illustration of weak perceived engagement (12–15% agreement), and municipal/sub-national bureaucracy is consistently among the least accessible channels in all three countries. These specific points deserve formal, regularised engagement.

02 **Suggest alternative funding instruments and schemes.** Roughly two-thirds of affected organisations engage in crisis-related advocacy regardless of country, thus the will is there. However, funding is the most commonly cited challenge in the context of crises across the CEE countries, most acutely in Estonia. Flexible, crisis-responsive funding instruments for civil society would target the constraint organisations themselves name most often.

03 **Involve geopolitically exposed organisations systematically in resilience and disinformation-response planning.** Geopolitical challenges and national security threats affect large shares of organisations in Lithuania and Estonia (52% and 59%) and are experienced as comparatively opportunity-rich terrain for advocacy in Lithuania. These organisations could be further included in crisis preparedness, shared training, and support the government while building national security awareness that reaches diverse societal groups.

04 **Develop indicators to assess and monitor the health of civil society.** Estonian organisations show the sharpest resource decline of the three countries yet report the lowest mortality anxiety and highest resilience investment; Lithuania shows the reverse pairing. Resource trends alone are an insufficient tool for organisational distress – monitoring frameworks should be put in place to monitor and, when needed, provide support to ensure the healthy work of the CSOs sector.

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QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST | CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

ReCiv The Resilient Civil Society Project

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

The Resilient Civil Society Project (ReCiv) seeks to examine civil society organisations' (CSOs) resilience in times of crisis. With a survey-based analysis of CSOs' activities in thirteen European countries (United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland) and the EU, as well as a series of elite interviews with CSO representatives, this project aims to answer the following research question: How does the European community of CSOs survive and adapt to different types of crises?

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Visit Resilient Civil Society project website

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